Title:

Tinkering with the Archive: Pathways to Conceptual Thought and Digital Practice

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Tinkering with the Archive:

Pathways to Conceptual Thought and Digital Practice

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ABSTRACT

Our aim in nurturing cross-pollination between the Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art and the Tinker Factory is to move between the creative and research worlds in new media arts, and to continue to forge innovative, groundbreaking initiatives that will expand our notion of the archive itself and the range of relational artistic interventions in its midst. Parallels between Sound Culture and Connections lays the future conceptual groundwork for cross-disciplinary international ventures where the value of conceptual tinkering with technical and physical tinkering opens the possibilities of inventive research in new media.

General Terms

Design, Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

Rose Goldsen Archive, Tinker Factory, art, theory, archive, new media, networking, artistic creation, research, relational

The last time we were in California together for digital meetings, Tim presented a paper at ISEA in San Jose where he discussed the transregional expansion of art from across the fluid East/West digital artistic network. Since then our work and collaborative projects have benefited from the continual proliferation of "digital discourse" that has brought the world closer in time and space so that the lines of East/West and North/South have lost the temporal markers that have so easily kept them apart. Rapid developments in internet art and critical exchange via digital technology have permitted us to host at Cornell University various communities from Japan, China, Korea, and Hong Kong while forging new productive exchanges between Latin American and Western artists as well. Formal gatherings sponsored by Cornell's Society for the Humanities and Rose Goldsen Lecture Series have foregrounded how experiments in the digital arts and humanities not only have generated exhilarating exhibitions but also catalyzed new cross-regional approaches to the organization and analysis of what is a rather elusive digital culture.

Figure 1. The Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art
<http://goldsen.library.cornell.edu>

What remains to be a challenge is the expansion of similar fluid movement between disciplinary boundaries in the academy. At Cornell University, for example, digital practice is bifurcated, as it is somewhat similarly at UC Irvine, by institutional divisions that sequester the departments of Art and Architecture in one college, the practices of theatre, film, dance, music, and literature in another college, and the experimentation of information science in another. There have been times when faculty have team-taught courses permitting students with similar interests to discover one another in the classroom. But the formal boundaries of academic structure, not to mention the slow academic legitimation of digital art and culture, has tended to ground such work on haphazard and infrequent connections. Our experience has been that critical theory and practice of tactical media and critical spatiality, which are central to our own pedagogies, have been less than welcome in the discourses of information science, computing, and technology. And don't we all know as practicing artists and theorists how frustrating haphazard connections can be! As a result of unsuccessful institutional attempts to create a cross-University program in Digital Art and Culture, one that would lend equal conceptual and financial weight to all points of view, whether algebraic, aesthetic, or theoretical, we have spent the past few years engaged in the development of more loosely defined and interconnected institutional sites and labs whose relative independence from the stricter divisions of academic terrain might better foster artistic and research activities.

Our collaborative work as managing moderators of the new media listserv, –empyre- a soft-skinned space, and as teachers and curators of new media art at Cornell University, has provided an occasion for us to experiment with various cross-platforms of the interdisciplinary exchange of art, culture, and ideas. While our institutional hosting of –empyre- has provided our students and colleagues with increased exposure to the wealth of international discourse on practice and theory that results from –empyre-'s monthly discussion topics--from "Critical Motion Practice" and "Wired Sustainability" to "Networked Catastrophe and Political Response"--we've been working on more concrete ways to bring together academic study and artistic practice via flexible institutional frameworks. Our primary focus has been on the development of the Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art. Tim founded the Archive in 2002 and acts as its archivist and curator in the Cornell Library. Renate acts as the New York State institutional liaison, which has permitted the Goldsen to engage in discussions and collaborations across the state. Among the visible New York media centers and institutions that have collaborated with Goldsen archival and public events include the Experimental Television Center in Owego, Hallwalls in Buffalo, RPI in Troy, Exit Art and Eyebeam in New York City.

Cornell's Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art is an archival repository and study center with a broad array of international new media art and its documentation. The curatorial vision emphasizes digital interfaces and artistic experimentation by international, independent artists. The Goldsen Archive includes materials by individual artists and collaborates on conceptual experimentation and archival strategies with international curatorial and fellowship projects.

The Archive has been particularly successful in implementing a "trans-regional" and interdisciplinary strategy of development and pedagogy. The aim in growing and thinking the parameters of the Archive has remained flexible so that its holdings and pedagogical opportunities might bend and fold anew in relation to emergent partnerships and/or new developments in the thought and practice of what might broadly be called "new media art." For instance, the project began as an archival place to assemble a critical mass of materials on internet and interactive art on CD/DVD-Rom. The idea for the Goldsen Archive took shape as we discussed strategies for maintaining access to the collection of CD-ROMs that Tim toured internationally from 1999-2004 as the exhibition, "Contact Zones: The Art of CD-Rom." As a partial result of the magnetic effect of this grouping of more than 80 artistic CD-ROMs from 23 countries, the Goldsen now not only maintains the Contact Zones bilingual website (in Spanish and English) but also provides access to what is perhaps the world's most extensive collection of art on CD-Rom, which has grown exponentially as a result of artist contributions and strategic acquisitions over the past six years (from a very limited acquisition budget). We might add that corporate strategies of planned obsolescence, such as Apple's shift to the Intel chip, threatens continuous accessibility to fifteen years of artistic production on these more classical combinations of hardware and software platforms. Part of the Goldsen mission is to track such challenges and work internationally, with organizations such as DOCAM, on strategies of access.

Cross-institutional collaboration has generated an equally significant collection of internet art housed either on-line or off-line by the Goldsen Archive. The Goldsen's efforts in this important area are anchored by two disparate initiatives. One of the inspirations for the Goldsen Archive itself was provided by Tim's work with Arthur and Marilouise Kroker on CTHEORY Multimedia. Designed and produced in the Cornell Library, this project resulted in three issues of internet art. Each issue grouped 12-15 online artworks that are packaged in an artistic interface that is particular to the conceptual volumes, "Tech Flesh: The Promise and Perils of the Human Genome Project," "Wired Ruins: Digital Terror and Ethnic Paranoia," and "NetNoise." The Goldsen Archive serves as the archival home of CTHEORY Multimedia. The other inspiration for the Goldsen Archive's approach to internet art, and the one that's had the most significant curatorial impact, is the LJUBLJANA INFOS 2000 collection, which Teo Spiller curated in collaboration with Tim for Slovenia's annual information festival. The key to the installation of the work of 24 international artists was that the artists agreed to make their work accessible off-line via its collection on open source CD-Rom, which was then distributed for free to participants of INFOS 2000. Also central to this project was the dissemination of the CD-Rom to independent media centers across the globe, particularly to those in regions whose users lacked domestic access to high-speed connections.

In our discussions about the future sustainability of some fifteen years of internet art, we concluded that it might be fruitful to use the INFOS project as a basis for considering Goldsen sponsorships of off-line repositories of internet art. The result today is our inclusion of the expansive collection of Computerfinearts.com and our current work with Turbulence.net to archive its commissioned collection off-line. The plan is to mirror both sites via the Goldsen website in order to provide the history and practice of net.art with the widest visibility to students and artists who are turning to the Goldsen Archive as a source of research information and artistic inspiration. We also are collaborating with Turbulence to provide a dialogical platform via the –empyre- listserv for transcontinental discussion of their recent projects.

At the moment of the Goldsen's founding, an opportunity also developed for it to become a leading research site of the broadest range of American new media art. We entered into conversations with the Rockefeller Foundation and National Video Resources led by Tania Blanich (which then became Renew Media before it was appropriated by the Tribeca Foundation). We managed to become the repository of the Rockefeller funded competition for US new media art fellowships, which was a spin off its film/video, media fellowships. The Goldsen now houses the dossiers and work samples of the competition's six years of activity. The collection brought together nearly fifty sets of dossiers and art samples annually (it is unfortunate that the Rockefeller Foundation eliminated its funding for all of these and the other media fellowships this past spring). A subsequent Cornell Library grant for faculty based projects for digital interventions in pedagogy has permitted us to digitize the analogue materials in these Rockefeller dossiers and to make them available online for international, pedagogical access.

What's been exciting to both of us is how each of our various interdisciplinary interfaces combining artistic and archival practice has resulted in the growth of the archive and the expansion of its curatorial and pedagogical mission. When Renate spent time in a summer artistic residency at the Experimental Television Center in Owego, New York, which since 1972 has

served as one of America's leading centers for artistic video production, she became sensitive to the expansive archive of analogue tapes housed in ETC's variously hot and cold loft in Upstate New York. While Ralph and Sherry Hocking, ETC's guardians, weren't quite ready to transfer the purity of their analogue collection to a more trustworthy digital, archival format, they later received a New York State grant to digitize the holdings, with the provision that the Goldsen Archive would serve as a permanent site for this digitized collection. Indeed, this unforeseen collaboration between the Goldsen Archive and ETC has led to a much broader formulation of the Archive's pedagogical mission as a presenter of electronic arts writ more large.

Along with ETC's collection, we now hold broader collections in American and European video art, as well as two specialized collections of immense value for the understanding of contemporary Chinese art. The Wen Pulin Archive of Chinese Avant-Garde Art includes 360 hours of digitized video documenting contemporary Chinese art events and installations since 1984. The Yao Jui-Chung Archive of Taiwan Contemporary Art consists of some 8,000 digitized images of paper and postcard invitations to contemporary art events in Taiwan over a twenty-year period, as well as archival footage, stills, and video of Taiwanese new media events and installations.

We have been fortunate to have been able to follow the lead of the Archive's documentation of Chinese art, for instance, by reflecting on the cultural significance of the Archive's cross-generational gathering of artists from the broader Chinese network (China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan) who create art in the emergent, interdisciplinary fields of electronic arts, new media, and mixed media performance. Their aim is to situate their past and current projects in terms of the theoretical, social, and political problems posed by the new trans-regional challenges of digital culture and historical transformation. Similarly the endeavor of archiving so-called ephemeral artistic works has required a reconsideration of the pedagogical aims and imperatives of art historical research and artistic practice while expanding the range of the Goldsen Archive itself vis à vis greater Asia in the global context.

We have thus been struck by how these various collections and the socio-cultural conditions of their production have expanded our sense of the pedagogical mission of the Goldsen Archive, as well as the cultural conditions and promises of digitality itself. One result has been to establish a stronger bridge to other pedagogical units on campus, from art and architecture to film and performance, while also opening productive connections to projects in Comparative Literature and Cornell's area studies programs (such as East Asian Studies and Latin American Studies) that previously tended to exclude electronic and digital practice from their discussions of art and its social impact.

In keeping with our openness to expanding the range of our vision and practice, the Goldsen Archive collaborated with the Departments of Art and Comparative Literature to win a Provost's Faculty Innovation in Teaching award that provided us with video streaming equipment for the purpose of launching an innovative series of Virtual Seminars. This model provides the opportunity for participants of Goldsen Lecture workshops and conferences to join in online conversation, via video streaming, with participants gathered at alternating international venues. DVD recordings of Goldsen Virtual Seminars are available for consultation in the Archive, while the blueprint information remains available on the web. Our inaugural project took place in collaboration with colleagues at the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia (UTS), with whom we had earlier collaborated on a live joint seminar with our students. A workshop on "Sound Cultures" introduced its Cornell audience to influential international artists and theorists who dwell on the cultural impact of sound in an electronic and digital age. Participants considered sound's importance in the era of visual studies, the cultural and ethnic specificity of sound fields and rhythms, the gender import of voice and spoken narrative, and the history and politics of electronic experimentations in sound. This workshop opened with an online seminar between speakers at the Cornell workshop and sound artists in Sydney Australia brought together by Norie Neumark, who serves on the Goldsen's International Advisory Board and is a well-known sound artist and Professor of New Media Arts and Production at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). This virtual seminar project then resulted in a similar expansion of the Goldsen's archival holdings through a much more active gathering of international works in sound art, which today is one of the curatorial emphases of development. It also has provided the blueprint for similar virtual seminars being developed by Cornell's Society for the Humanities. Indeed, the play of corporeal errancy and trans-regional flow not only foregrounds the pedagogical discourse nurtured by the Goldsen's academically flexible structure, but also has developed into a foundational paradigm shaping the development of the Goldsen Archive itself.

Conversely, the Goldsen's growth as an interdisciplinary center of research and discourse in the broad expanse of new media art has now helped to catalyze a new interdisciplinary studio of interactive creation. Renate's collaboration with Tim as a moderator of –empyre- soft skinned space and a liaison to the Goldsen Archive has inspired her to realize the potential for forging cross-disciplinary areas of creation for both faculty and students within the university structure. Renate's position as a faculty member in the Department of Art has provided her with an opportunity to work on art curriculum research consequently forging new models between creative practice and theory. Her courses in New Media contain the components of seminar and studio, which have convinced a few others that there is an importance for artists to create conceptually and technically in tandem. For example, our first year studio in conceptual drawing is partnered with a seminar on basic issues in contemporary theory.

After two years of planning and grant writing, with the assistance of seed funding from Cornell University's Council for the Arts and the Goldsen Archive, Renate has recently opened a flexible lab for artistic creation. Countering institutional boundaries and structures of "colleges", "departments", "concentrations", and "media", The Tinker Factory runs as a platform independent of Cornell's college structure, and as one indifferent to disciplinary divisions of technological resources, information and knowledge. The Tinker Factory www.tinkerfactory.net, is a research center for design, creativity, and interdisciplinary technology. Its aim is to support a collaborative, inter-disciplinary environment that will nurture interactive, technological, and artistic research. Participants include undergraduate and graduate students and faculty from the Colleges of Architecture, Art and Planning,

Figure 2. The Tinker Factory housed in the Department of Art at Cornell University, a lab for research design, creativity, and interdisciplinary technology <www.tinkerfactory.net>

the College of Arts and Sciences, and the College of Information Science who work across disciplinary boundaries to investigate technical possibilities, artistic collaborations, and the critical and historical implications of ongoing research projects.

Its conceit is to play off the interface of "tinker" and "factory" which has been fostered as working paradigms in other New York environments. Renate's colleague at the University of Buffalo, Paul Vanouse, likes to think of his teaching studios as spaces of "tinkering" and refers to the interactive collaborative inventions of his students as "gizmos." The website www.exploratorium.edu defines "tinkering" as "what happens when you try something you don't quite know how to do, guided by whim, imagination, and curiosity. When you tinker, there are no instructions-but there are also no failures, no right or wrong ways of doing things. It's about figuring out how things work and reworking them. Tinkering is, at its most basic, a process that marries play with inquiry."

Image what then might happen when tinkering occurs within the imaginary of The Factory, an earlier well-know environment in New York City. Andy Warhol's conceit for an interdisciplinary studio space as a platform for practical work, conceptual innovation, and social happening lays the conceptual impetus for the project. Groundbreaking creative energy was characteristic of The Factory, which became a meeting place for artists, musicians, actors, and many others. The Tinker Factory aims to function as a similarly open, adaptable, and relationally collaborative meeting place where the value of experimental conceptual tinkering is just as important as its technical and physical counterparts.

As a pedagogical and relational space of creative artistic practice, The Tinker Factory will benefit from the current impetus of

international collaborations converging fine arts, music and sound, performance/movement, programming, computing and interactivity, and finally art history, theory, criticism and politics. Through research, networking and artistic creation, students, faculty, and guest artists and researchers will encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration. In these times of tight budgets, we hope to realize new directions in low impact arts and technology through the sharing of resources, equipment, technical expertise, and knowledge.

The new possibilities between the Goldsen Archive's mission and the Tinker Factory's parallel interests were showcased in the premiere kick-off event of the Tinker Factory. Following the model of the Goldsen Archive's Virtual Seminars, Renate launched The Tinker Factory's first workshop in October of 2009.

Funded by the Cornell Council on the Arts, "Connections" was collaboration between Renate and Professor Kevin Ernst, an electronic composer in music and technology. With invited guest Kevin Hamilton from the University of Illinois, at Urbana, Champagne students and faculty collectively shared a platform of conceptual ideas and plans for the artistic use of collaborative interactive technology with sound/noise and other ephemeral qualities of interest.

Our aim in nurturing cross-pollination between the Goldsen Archive for New Media Art and the Tinker Factory is not only to move between the creative and research worlds in new media arts, but also to continue to forge innovative initiatives that will expand our notion of the archive itself and the range of relational artistic interventions in its midst. Parallels between the Goldsen Archive's Virtual Seminar and The Tinker Factory's Connections lays the conceptual ground-work for future cross-disciplinary international ventures where the value of conceptual tinkering with technical and physical tinkering opens the possibilities of inventive research in new media.

Our hope is that this presentation might help to catalyze collaborations with international media centers underserved by the institutional resources from which we profit at Cornell University. By following the lead of the earlier INFOS 2000 model of sharing artistic collateral with diverse media centers and by experimenting with social networking sites, we are now working to engage in collaborations with colleagues in Costa Rica and China to mirror the activities of similar sites of tinkering. Our anticipation is that an on-line sharing of various international experiments in tinkering might shift the artistic and curatorial model away from prior colonial foci from center to periphery and toward emergent networks of cross-fluid pollination.